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Colley, Helen (2001) An ABC of mentors' talk about disaffected youth: alternative lifestyles, benefit dependency or complete dunces? *Youth and Policy* (72). pp. 1-15. ISSN 0262-9798

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**Version:** Accepted Version

**Publisher:** National Youth Agency

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

## **An ABC of mentors' talk about disaffected youth: Alternative lifestyles, Benefit dependency or Complete dunces?**

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Published in 2001 in *Youth and Policy* (72) 1-15.

*ABSTRACT: Mentoring is increasingly popular with policy-makers as a way of addressing disaffection among young people. Evaluative research from a number of such schemes emphasise the importance of empathy on the part of mentors building relationships with young people. However, there is little empirical evidence to substantiate the implicit claim that mentors demonstrate such empathy. This paper draws upon the findings of a qualitative research project about mentoring relationships between university students and disaffected youth. The research investigated ways in which mentors talked about disaffected young people, and how this might impact upon the mentoring process. It eschewed psychological and individualised approaches which dominate the literature. This paper traces mentors' views to the wider political and social context, through identifying their source in official discourse. It considers whether such mentoring interventions engender solidarity with the socially excluded or reinforce prejudice against them, and raises implications for the training and support of mentors working with disaffected youth.*

Mentors befriend the young people by getting to know them and trying to understand their world view.

(Employment Support Unit, 2000: 3)

### **Mentoring takes off**

There has been a recent explosion in this country in the use of mentoring, particularly as an intervention with young people officially classified as disaffected or socially excluded. Individual mentoring projects have been heavily promoted and sponsored by a number of government departments, notably the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), the Department of Health, and the Home Office (Skinner and Fleming, 1999), and the last year has seen the publication of a number of significant evaluation reports of these projects. The DfEE, however, have also taken major steps to embed the concept of mentoring as a central element of some of its most important initiatives since New Labour came to power, with the use of Personal Advisers in the New Deal and the Learning Gateway, and Learning Mentors within *Excellence in Cities*. This process has culminated in its proposal for a new youth support service, *ConneXions*, billed as a 20,000-strong army of personal mentors for all teenagers. The Sunday Times reported that Education and Employment Secretary David Blunkett believes that this mentor service will be able to 'boost educational standards, ease social problems and even reduce crime' (Prescott and Black, 2000).

This rise in popularity for mentoring has arisen in the final years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century within a specific social, economic and political context. In both the US and the UK, it has been seized on by policy-makers, and is almost invariably tied to employment-related goals imposed externally by its institutional settings and funding régimes (Freedman, 1995), as in, for example, a raft of mentoring projects developed under

the European Community Youthstart Initiative. Freedman (1995, 1999) argues that the current 'fervour' for mentoring has been promoted by powerful ruling interests in the climate of global competitiveness. Governments need to reduce public spending on welfare, but are also concerned about ensuing urban unrest, as society is increasingly polarised along lines of class, gender and race. Mentoring has become an important aspect of welfare-to-work policies because it resonates with a number of other developments: the moralisation of social exclusion; the rhetoric of 'upskilling' and the threat of a supposed 'underclass'; the attraction of a cheap 'quick fix' to social problems, especially if volunteers can be recruited to mentor; and because of its facile affinity with the individualistic philosophy of the 'American Dream' and New Labour's 'Third Way'.

This paper draws on evidence from an empirical research project to examine some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the process of mentoring socially excluded youth. It reviews an aspect of mentoring that is emphasised by many of the existing evaluation reports, that is, mentors' empathy with young people's social and personal situations. However, there are no empirical studies of mentoring in the UK which provide evidence of mentors' 'mindset' (Millwater and Yarrow, 1997) towards disaffected young people. Consequently, evaluation reports fail to question the assumption (and implicit claim) that mentors are able to empathise with their mentees in positive and helpful ways. The research findings presented here offer examples of three types of discourse about disaffected young people that volunteer mentors used. It argues that these mentors operated predominantly within deficit or deviancy models of their mentees' needs. This is not, of course, a new argument in the broader field of youth policy and interventions (see, for example, Jeffs, 1997), but it is one that has barely been investigated in studies of mentoring. In the UK, critiques of current developments in youth mentoring have been restricted to theoretical studies (e.g. Gulam and Zulfiqar, 1998; Piper and Piper, 1999, 2000). This paper aims to bring empirical evidence to bear on the concern of such critiques that mentoring is too often disembedded from its social, political and institutional context. Implications for practice are considered, as well as the need for further research as mentoring expands through new, policy-driven initiatives.

### **Evaluations emphasise empathy**

Given the government's current emphasis on evidence-based practice, their move to 'mainstream' mentoring might be expected to draw on available research. Individual mentoring projects have developed in the UK since 1994, many of them funded by the European Social Fund. As they reach the end of their current funding cycles, a series of evaluative reports are now available (e.g. Employment Support Unit (ESU), 2000; Ford, 1999; Skinner and Fleming, 1999). A striking feature of these reports is the way in which they emphasise not only the skills and knowledge, but also the *attitudes* needed to be an effective mentor when working with disaffected or socially excluded young people. This in itself represents something of a sea-change, a challenge to the competence-based approach which has come to dominate training for helping professionals and volunteers (Issitt, 2000).

Empathy, a non-judgmental stance and the avoidance of authoritarianism are presented as essential attitudes for mentors. This is central to the view promoted by Youthstart mentoring projects, as well as others which similarly aimed to enhance socially excluded young people's access to the labour market:

Mentors befriend the young people by getting to know them and trying to understand their world view...Mentors come from all walks of life. A mentor can be anyone who empathises and provides non-judgmental and non-directive support...Mentors also need to have a non-judgmental attitude. (ESU, 2000: 3; see also Skinner and Fleming, 1999)

Elsewhere, key concepts from person-centred counselling theory (Egan, 1975; Rogers, 1951) are used to describe the qualities necessary for mentors: 'Empathy: [the] ability to enter the client's frame of reference...Warmth, regard, acceptance of the client... non-judgmental approach' (Ford, 1999: 74). Mentoring schemes using volunteer, rather than professional, mentors recommend the use of volunteers from young people's own communities, or peer mentors, to ensure such empathy informs mentoring relationships (ESU, 2000; Forbes, 2000).

Evaluation reports also claim that one of the benefits created by mentoring is that mentors develop increased understanding of young people, and of the conditions of social exclusion. There is an assumption that mentoring will not only create 'filter-down' benefits such as self-confidence and higher aspirations for socially excluded young people, but also that it will create tolerance and a sense of social solidarity among the mentors.

### **What do we think we're doing?**

What evidence is there, however, that these processes are taking place? How capable are mentors – volunteers or professionals – of genuinely entering into the frame of reference of disaffected young people? To what extent does mentoring engender greater tolerance and understanding of the situation of socially excluded young people, and of the ways in which they construe the world? Although a vast quantity of literature on mentoring has appeared over the last two decades, it does little to answer these questions. Most of it consists in anecdotal accounts, rather than any serious attempt to research the actual process of mentoring, and most of it starts from a biased assumption that mentoring has to be a good thing (Merriam, 1983; Piper and Piper, 2000). The more serious studies tend to be 'before and after' psychological questionnaires which tell us little about intermediate processes. Evaluation reports, which currently dominate the UK literature on youth mentoring, may be influenced by conformative pressures to demonstrate positive outcomes to funding bodies (Stronach and Morris, 1994.)

Social constructivism offers a different approach to understanding mentoring relationships, situating them within the multi-layered contexts in which they are formed (Fachin Lucas, 2001; Millwater and Yarrow, 1997). Such an approach suggests that the wider beliefs of participants, particularly of mentors, are central to the process and outcomes of mentoring. The discourses mentors use are not simply individual representations, but are instances of wider discursive, material and *social* practices. As such, they may represent the internalisation by individuals of covert power and hegemonic ideology, inscribed in particular socio-historical contexts (cf. Foucault, 1977/1991; Marston, 2000). In this light, the research sought to investigate not only participants' understanding of mentoring, but also the meanings they brought

to 'disaffection', on the premise that this might well reveal influences on the process of mentoring itself (cf. Watts, 1999).

The research, conducted as a three-year doctoral project, focused on case studies within a programme anonymised as 'New Beginnings'. New Beginnings was a European-funded vocational preparation and work experience scheme run by a local Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) for 16-19 year olds identified as 'disaffected'. The scheme has since become part of the Learning Gateway. One element of the programme was to offer the young people the option of having a mentor for an hour a week at the TEC headquarters. The mentors were volunteer undergraduates from the local university campus, who had all undergone a training course of four days – fairly substantial compared with many other similar programmes (ESU, 2000; Skinner and Fleming, 1999).

The data generation was conducted in 1999 and 2000, mainly through semi-structured individual interviews of 60 to 90 minutes with 9 pairs of mentors and young people in established mentoring relationships, as well as with New Beginnings staff and managers, and with professionals referring young people to the programme. None of the research participants were from an ethnic minority. Inevitably, within its remit this paper focuses only on the mentors (although for detailed insights into the young people's perspectives in this research, see Colley, 2000; for a detailed analysis of relevant policy and political context, see Colley and Hodgkinson, 2001). One point needs to be made, however, about the mentees in these case studies. These were not 'deeply alienated' young people (as in Williamson and Middlemiss' (1999) typology of disaffected youth). Despite real difficulties in their lives, they had engaged with the New Beginnings programme, had chosen to accept the help of a mentor, and had been able to establish relationships on some level. This is important to bear in mind when considering what their mentors had to say about them.

In analysing the mentors' views on disaffection, and their perceptions of the disaffected young people they were mentoring, the research adopted the tripartite framework suggested by a number of authors (Mann, 1994; Silver, 1994; Watts, 1999). Watts (1999) argued that there are 3 ways of interpreting social exclusion or disaffection. It can be seen as *deviance*, according to a moral interpretation which sees a threat to society from an underclass which has deviant values and behaviour; it can be seen as *deficit*, according to a structural interpretation, which sees the disaffected as victims of disadvantage; or it can be seen as a form of *diversity* or cultural adaptation, involving rational choices of alternative lifestyles for survival in the face of economic and social inequalities. Some of the data from interviews with the mentors at New Beginnings illustrate their interpretations of disaffection and reveal patterns in their talk about it.

### **Alternative lifestyles: disaffection as diversity**

Vic was a mature student in the third year of an Applied Social Sciences degree, mentoring Dave, a young care leaver who was homeless and had a record of petty offending. Vic was one of the minority of mentors interviewed, who seemed to view disaffection as a complex and problematic issue. Vic explicitly rejected official uses and definitions of disaffection, seeing them as authoritarian. He objected to the use of the term 'disaffected' as a form of labelling:

The interpretation I came across was basically disaffected youths are people who don't fit in to the mainstream of youth culture, which is a very broad definition...I don't actually like that definition. I wasn't happy with it. I mean, what is normal? And what is mainstream youth like? In times of high unemployment and areas of high unemployment, mainstream youth **is** disaffected youth! I didn't like the term...I've got a feeling that what people are actually talking about is that they're going against authority, basically, or authority's views on what is right. The moral issue is 'This is what they should be doing, and they're not.' And that does irk me a little bit. I don't think we should set ourselves up to say what people should be doing. I think certainly advise and perhaps, you know, point to alternative lifestyles. But people at the end of the day, even young people, should be in a position to choose, and if they choose that it's something different then why should we condemn them?

There is an explicit rejection here of dominant social or cultural norms, and a refusal to judge young people by such norms. Vic accepted difference on that level – different choices that young people make. But he challenged the normative way in which he felt the language used at New Beginnings imposed difference:

'Mentee' – it just doesn't sound nice...If I was described as a mentee, it's not a nice word, is it?...Straight away, we're separating ourselves, mentor and mentee, you know, teacher and pupil or whatever.

What seemed to be important for Vic was not an *elimination* of difference between himself and the young people being mentored, but a *recognition* of difference through the process of empathy. Such recognition refuses to construct the mentor's own perspective as normative, and treats the young people's views and experiences as alternative, rather than as inferior.

### **Benefit dependency: shifting from deficit to deviance**

Jane, another mature student of Applied Social Sciences, had some recent background in Rogerian counselling. Having practised as a volunteer counsellor in a self-help group for several years, and completed a Certificate in Counselling, person-centred theories and concepts were prominent in her explanations of mentoring. She was matched with Annette, a 17-year-old young woman who was pregnant, and who was doing very well in her work experience placement as an administrator at the New Beginnings programme itself. Given the centrality of concerns for empathy, acceptance and non-judgmental attitudes that we have already noted in counselling theory and practice, it is interesting to see how this colours her view of disaffection:

I think it multiplies, doesn't it? If you're in school and you're a social outcast in a way, because you're either in care or you've got problems at home in one way or another, or you've committed a minor offence, you get in a certain bracket, and I think that can just escalate, and problems can get bigger and bigger and that becomes you. And for a lot of them also, in the families that they come from, it's the norm to do what they're doing and to have these problems, so they don't see them as problems, it's just their way of life...it's so different than perhaps the life you or me would lead.

She begins by citing aspects that could be seen as deficits, where the young person is constructed as the victim of disadvantage, even mitigating the deviance of criminality by referring to 'a minor offence'. She then tries to demonstrate empathy and acceptance by referring to alternative norms of families who don't see these issues as problems. She ends, however, by making the distinction between these families and 'the life you or me would lead'. A little further into her explanation, we see a deepening struggle with these concepts:

I mean, some of the things they talk about, you know! 'My sister had a baby and my granddad brought it up'. But that's normal! 'Sister didn't want it, so my granddad had it, my dad married so-and-so, had a baby, they didn't want it, so my sister had that one', and it's all so intermingled and...But it's normal, you know, it's what they accept, and you can sit there and think 'Oh! What?!', but the more they talk, the more it's how life is for them.

The avowal of 'what is normal' for the disaffected, of 'how life is for them' attempts to be non-judgmental, but it seems to fail in the very way that it is distanced from and contrasted with Jane's own perception of dominant social norms, revealed in the shocked exclamation that she thinks, but cannot visibly reveal, in front of the young person. This raises the difficulty of achieving not only empathy, but also of achieving congruence (the extent to which the helper's words accurately reflect their thoughts and feelings, and therefore convey trustworthiness to the client), one of the other central 'core conditions' in the Rogerian framework (Rogers, 1951). Still further into the interview, however, a different view emerged in response to a question about the long-term prospects facing young people at New Beginnings:

It seems to be, the more I talk to them I didn't realise how much, but it's 'Oh, I'll decorate the baby's bedroom when this cheque comes'... 'My boyfriend's gone on the sick, so when he gets his big cheque, we'll do this'... The boyfriend is off work...22 and a 17-year-old, fully healthy people, but they've no intention of doing anything, and not an education to get them where they want to go...It's this cheque, that cheque, social, income support, but it's the only thing they know, and to me...like you said, what's the future? Who can make such a difference to make them change? Who can make such a big impact to say 'That is not the way you're going to go for the rest of your life'?

Here, benefit dependency, unwillingness to do paid work, lack of regard for education, and teenage pregnancy as a means to increase welfare payments are presented as instances of deviance. Jane finds herself unable to apply to disaffected youth Rogerian beliefs about the capacity for human transformation. Her comments about illegitimacy and 'healthy people with no intention of doing anything' recall those of Charles Murray: 'the definitive proof that an underclass has arrived is that large numbers of young, healthy, low-income males choose not to take jobs' (Murray, 1990: 17). The task posed is to alter these deviant values and behaviours, but Jane seemed to have a pessimistic view that disaffected young people may not in fact be susceptible to such helping interventions. Jane's interview reveals a pattern that is common in several of the mentors' accounts. Initial definitions of disaffection, particularly in relation to the individual young person, seemed to fall within the mode of 'deficit', but as the interviews progressed, their discourse shifted towards a more

explicit discourse of deviance. Let us see how two other mentors took this somewhat further than Jane did.

**Complete dunces: fear of the underclass**

Aileen and Emily were two young student teachers who asked to be interviewed together. Aileen had been working with Heather, who had been abandoned by her parents at an early age, and adopted and brought up by her grandparents. Heather had attended a special school for children with moderate learning difficulties, and had made a positive choice in Year 11 to enter the New Beginnings programme, where she had quickly settled into a long-term work experience placement, working towards NVQ Level 1 in Retail. Emily had been mentoring Leanne, who had been in care, self-harmed on a regular basis, had been unable to sustain her work experience placement, and had just had to move to a distant part of the country when she left care.

In the early part of the interview, their discussion of the young people and of disaffection was again predominantly around issues of deficit, with some reference to deviance. They cited problems such as poverty, family difficulties, academic failure, emotional and psychological problems, and learning difficulties on the one hand. On the other, there were occasional references to laziness, criminality, disruptive behaviour, and teenage pregnancy. Interestingly, given their own desire to become educators, and their belief in the value of positive educational experiences in preventing disaffection, Aileen and Emily offered a very pessimistic view of the possibility of young people exiting from this deficit state. They expressed the notion, as Jane did, that disaffection consists in some kind of permanently arrested development, not susceptible to interventions:

[The government] are saying about tackling social exclusion...It's too late. These people, they've experienced so much exclusion throughout...they don't stand a chance. (Aileen)

At times they compared their mentees' lack of development with their own progress:

I've done most of my developing at university, when you start to realise who you are...they've never ever had the chance to do that, so when they become adults, they're developmental stage is still very young, and so when they have kids themselves, their kids are not going to get the chance to develop either through any experiences. (Emily)

Both of these themes – the intractability of the problem and the contrast of the self with 'these people', situating young people firmly as marginal and abnormal – are recognisable in most of the other mentors' accounts. However, about half way through the interview, the following exchange took place:

Emily: Really it's a fundamental problem in society. But you need to retrain families in how to act, I think, and give parents training and vet them as whether they're suitable to have kids. I think they may have to resort to that. (Laughs)



*HC: But even if you could churn out perfect people, are there jobs there for them – are there going to be jobs for everyone even if everybody's qualified?*

Aileen: *(To Emily, earnestly)* You were saying about having children. All the sex education is very important. But the people that are actually going to listen are the well-educated people like me and Emily. I mean, people that we have been to school with have probably got about 5 kids by now. And they're going to be turning out like their mothers, like these people that were disaffected in school. Whereas because of sex education, we're well educated, so we know we're not going to have 6 children. We're probably going to bring maybe 2 or 3 hopefully normal *(Emily laughs)* sort of people into the world, tuned in with society sort of children. Whereas it's the opposite, surely the government want to try and persuade **us** to have the 6 or 7 children *(Emily laughs)* that do stand a chance.

E: Yeah.

A: And not do the sex education. But not let all the disaffected pupils have children. See what I mean? [...] They're the type of people we don't want to be having kids, because they're going to be bringing complete dunces into the world, which I know is an awful thing to say. But it's true. We don't want them having kids!

Thus, a eugenic 'final solution' is posed to protect society from being swamped by deviants, once again reminiscent of Charles Murray's warnings of the catastrophic threat to society posed by single mothers supposedly breeding large numbers of unintelligent children. There is a sense of fear and intimidation in relation to disaffected youth, and the solutions posed are both controlling and punitive. It is hard to see how empathy and non-judgmental acceptance could enter a relationship with someone who holds such beliefs. Emily was relieved that her relationship had been ended by Leanne's move to a new area. For Aileen, the relationship with Heather became unsustainable, and she brought it to a sudden end. No social solidarity seemed to have been engendered.

### **Outcomes**

The government sees mentoring as having a key role to play in achieving specified educational or employment outcomes through initiatives such as New Deal, Education Action Zones and Excellence in Cities. Yet research has consistently provided little evidence of such outcomes from mentoring for the most disadvantaged (Golden and Sims, 1997; Jeffs and Spence, 2000; Skinner and Fleming, 1999). In this light, it is worth briefly recounting the outcomes for mentees in this study. Vic's mentee Dave continued to experience a chaotic lifestyle due to homelessness, and was recorded as eventually 'disappearing' from New Beginnings. Vic had provided him with information about college courses, and hoped that Dave might take up one of those opportunities. However, the rules of New Beginnings meant that they had no way of keeping in touch with each other. Jane's mentee Annette left New Beginnings to have her baby, and the following year appeared to be a very happy and competent young mother. Having been placed in care herself, she wished to be with her daughter full-time during her early years, and had no plans to look for work until the child started school. Unfortunately, Annette would probably register as a failure and as a

continuing problem within the framework outlined in, for example, *Bridging The Gap* (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). Heather achieved her NVQ Level 1 at the shop where she worked, gained employed status as a youth trainee, and was progressing to Level 2 when the shop closed and made her redundant. She was unable to get another retail job, and was contemplating alternative work in care for the elderly. It was difficult for her to access support and training, however, since she had passed her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Heather longed to see Aileen again, and treasured a scrapbook they had begun to make together but never finished. Mentoring seemed to have repeated her earlier experiences of abandonment and loss.

These were the individual, short-term outcomes for a few of the mentees at New Beginnings. Others were sacked from the scheme for behavioural or attendance problems or 'laziness'. Some drifted through it without ever establishing a successful work placement, and simply exited onto unemployment benefit at the age of 18. One young man with special needs completed his NVQ Level 1 in Catering and was employed part-time by the firm where he had been placed. This paper aims, however, to consider also the claims noted in its introduction, that outcomes for mentoring might include a growth in social solidarity through mentors' empathy for socially excluded youth.

### **Denying the Other**

In a way, Aileens' 'final solution' is a form of denial – denial of the right to existence for the socially excluded. There were many occasions in the interviews when mentors denied young people's voice, experience and identity, constructing them as the 'Other'. Young people were frequently referred to, in a reifying manner, as 'these people', 'that sort', 'my one'. As well as denying them valid identities in this way, their voices were often portrayed as untrustworthy:

I suppose I was shocked, but I always try not to be too shocked, because a lot of the time it's just used to try and make you shocked. (Jane)

She can, I think, tell a few porkies [*i.e. lies*] when she wants to as well, and a lot of the things she says I take with a pinch of salt. (Sian)

It was quite difficult at first to have to sit and listen and filter out the rubbish. (Patricia)

These examples belie the assumption that mentors listen to young people in an empathetic and non-judgmental way. While we can acknowledge the inevitable accuracy of some mentors' statements that the young people only tell 'their side of the story', their accounts imply more than this, namely that other adult versions of events are the 'real version'. Being non-judgmental becomes reduced to *not reacting visibly* in a judgmental way. There is no sense of 'acceptance' or 'unconditional positive regard' in the Rogerian sense (Rogers, 1951).

There is also a denial by some mentors of the validity of young people's experiences:

I mean, my girl, she doesn't go out, she doesn't do anything. I say: 'Are you going out this week?' 'No! I'm going to bingo with my nan.' And that'll be

it...And is she ever going to get back in with society, so she starts to experience some kind of inclusion? (Aileen)

The young person clearly does go out, does do something, is included – but it does not *count*, and her personhood is negated. How could person-centred empathy and acceptance possibly be undertaken, if the mentor does not believe that the Other is truly a person?

### **The influence of dominant discourse**

In considering the way in which some mentors at New Beginnings constructed socially excluded youth as the dangerous Other, this researcher also runs the danger of constructing the mentors in turn as Other, pointing the finger at their inability to empathise with their mentees (James Avis, personal communication, 17 May 2000). All of the mentors volunteered to take part in the programme because of genuine desires to help young people less advantaged themselves, and all but one intended to enter careers with a similar purpose. They were not ideologically fascist, wickedly uncaring, or stupidly incapable of imagining another person's perspective. So where did their ideas come from?

We have a long tradition in this country of seeing young people (whether disaffected or otherwise) as 'a mere locus of lacks' (Cohen, 1986: 54), by their very nature *disqualified*. Cohen also notes a parallel tradition of moral panic about young people that has persisted throughout the economic good times and the bad. These are embedded in the dominant discourse that shapes common sense views of such issues. It is very difficult for the wider population, particularly for the middle classes who often furnish volunteers for mentoring projects, to avoid this official, hegemonic discourse, which pervades the written and spoken texts that surround us, and therefore pervades our beliefs and actions (Burton and Carlen, 1979; Morgan, 1999). Meanings are mobilised in order to maintain existing power relations and transmit ideology that serves the interests of dominant groupings (Anderson, 1989), and the arena of mentoring disaffected youth is not exempt from this effect.

A prime example of such dominant discourse can be seen in the media reporting of the trial of Tony Martin, who shot 16-year-old Fred Barras as he burgled Martin's house. The *Sunday Times* seized upon the opportunity to invite Charles Murray back to Britain, and to proselytise his views on the threat to 'civilised society' from the 'unsocialised' at the margins (Sunday Times, 2000a). In the same edition, columnist Melanie Phillips warned of the danger that New Labour's social exclusion agenda will generate a politics of resentment, while providing a classic example of that very phenomenon (Phillips, 2000). The letters page a week later (Sunday Times, 2000b) was dominated by statements that either portray Fred Barras as the incarnation of disaffected youth, and/or justify his summary execution. William Hague, former leader of the Conservative Party, added his voice to the clamour too. This response to the incident is exemplified in Richard Littlejohn's conclusion in the *Sun*:

[W]hen criminals break the law, especially when they violate someone's home, they should forfeit all legal protection. They have put themselves outside the law and they should face the consequences, *even if that costs them their lives*.

(Littlejohn, 2000, emphasis added)

Such discourse represents the ultimate negation of the lives of those we construct as disaffected. However, it both derives from and sustains the politically climate identified earlier in this paper – which has also driven mentoring to prominence as an intervention with the socially excluded.

What are the possibilities of empathy, acceptance, or solidarity between mentors and young people targeted by schemes for the disaffected? Haber (1994), in seeking to advance an oppositional politics to challenge dominant power relations, argues that solidarity only becomes possible with an acknowledgement of difference, of the plurality of communities and of the self, which can find affinity with different communities in contingent ways. It is perhaps this acknowledgement that we see in the accounts of the minority of mentors who avoid embracing the 'deviance' model when talking about disaffection. Without the ability to listen to *and hear* the voice and vocabulary of others, Haber (1994) argues that the tendency will always be to marginalise Others as deviants beyond the pale.

### **What *do* we think we're doing?**

To return to our three models of disaffection, as deviance, deficit, or diversity, Watts (1999) also argued that each of these interpretations can be seen to have specific implications for what we think we are doing in interventions such as guidance or, in this case, mentoring. It makes a difference to mentoring practice, if we view disaffected young people as choosing alternative lifestyles, or as benefit dependants, or as complete dunces who should be sterilised.

If we take the 'deviance' view, the tendency is to think that one's task is to rescue young people from a subversive condition – and to punish or further isolate those who, when offered rescue, do not comply. They then become the self-excluded, rather like the Victorian notion of the undeserving poor. In a 'deficit' model, the focus becomes 'repairing' young people's lacks so that they can integrate with normative expectations and existing structures, with Victorian echoes again, this time of the deserving poor (Ecclestone, 1999). Although this is often given the gloss of 'empowering' individual young people, it does not equip them to understand or challenge injustice or inequality in the structures of society. Like the deviance model, it similarly retains the potential for further exclusion of those who resist or fail to fit. The concept of 'empowerment' thus paradoxically embraces a regulatory moral authoritarianism rather than an genuinely emancipatory practice (Baistow, 1994/95; Ecclestone, 1999; Jeffs and Smith, 1996). These models seem particularly problematic where there are marked cultural distances between the helper and the helped. The findings from the research reported here suggest that cultural misunderstanding is not just a problem for youth from ethnic minorities (Forbes, 2000; Freedman, 1993), but also exists between white middle class mentors and white working class youth.

A 'diversity' model would locate solutions within communities rather than within the individual, recognising the inclusion generated by peer cultures and sub-cultures and the creative, constructive possibilities of adaptive behaviours, such as work within informal economies. It might highlight the need to broaden the bounds of tolerance and inclusion, rather than rescuing the socially excluded from beyond an excessively narrow pale. It is only this model which demands that mentors attempt to understand

young people's personal and social constructs, and to empathise genuinely with them. However, the influence of dominant discourse about socially excluded youth may make it difficult for mentors to adopt such an approach.

### **Conclusion**

Mentoring is a highly popular element of current policies to address social exclusion. It is already becoming embedded in national initiatives like the Learning Gateway, and it will move further into the spotlight as the *ConneXions* youth support service is introduced. Although small-scale, the research findings presented here reveal the weakness of the general assumption that middle class mentors can demonstrate empathy and acceptance of working class young people. In this respect, the current expansion of mentoring will undoubtedly help some young people, but at the same time may in risk reinforcing the marginalisation of others.

There is, of course, scope for larger-scale and more detailed research in this area of inquiry, particularly among Personal Advisers in the new national initiatives which have recently been piloted. Such research might valuably investigate the personal constructs that professional mentors bring to their practice, the context of those constructs, social and economic factors which influence them, and the way they are controlled or deployed within mentoring relationships. Action research might be particularly useful in using the lessons of ethnic minority mentoring, and applying them to the mentoring of socially excluded youth as another form of cross-cultural mentoring – bearing in mind, of course, the arguments from some that young people are better served by mentors drawn from their own communities than by privileged adults from outside (Gulam & Zulfiqar, 1998).

The range of attitudes and values held by the volunteer mentors reported here may also be reflected among many professionals involved in mentoring roles with young people: careers advisers, personal advisers, youth workers and social workers, for example (Geoff Ford, personal communication, 17 December 2000). As Ford (1999) has already suggested in his evaluation of the Institute of Career Guidance (ICG) Mentoring Action Project, far more needs to be done to challenge mentors to consider the implications their beliefs about disaffection, and to confront stereotyped images of disaffected youth. As well as the undoubted commitment to helping young people achieve their potential which mentors bring with them, there is a need to equip them also to recognise both the diversity of barriers (structural as well as individual) that young people face, and the validity of different forms of cultural practice in marginalised communities. This needs to be part of mentors' training, and part of the on-going support offered to them.

In addition, as Philip (2000) rightly notes, there is a need for research which can help develop theoretical understandings of mentoring by considering young people themselves as active agents within the process, rather than as passive recipients of it. Further research along these lines is undoubtedly warranted as mentoring becomes more tightly linked to compulsory participation for groups such as young offenders and benefit claimants (British Youth Council, 1999).

It may be that empathy and solidarity only become genuinely possible with an acknowledgement of difference, of the plurality of communities, and the plurality of the self, which can find affinity with different communities in contingent ways. This

conclusion, however, would present a considerable challenge to policies which see mentoring as a 'quick-fix' remedial intervention to bring disaffected young people in line with dominant social norms.

**Acknowledgements:** I would like to thank Phil Hodgkinson of the University of Leeds, Jane Artess and Mary Issitt of the Manchester Metropolitan University, Geoff Ford of NICEC, and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this work; also the members of the BERA Post-16 Special Interest Group, and delegates at the Institute of Careers Guidance Annual Conference 2000, for opportunities for critical discussion.

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